



## The Maras and National Security in Central America

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### Introduction

The level of attention directed at the *maras*, *pandillas*, or gangs, in Central America and the United States, is increasing rapidly. Not only are there significant articles in publications such as *The New York Times*, *The Economist*, and *Foreign Affairs*, but there are also regional conferences sponsored by the U.S. Department of State, U.S. Southern Command, the Presidents of Central America, and a large variety of national, regional, and international police organizations.[1] With the opening of debate on the Central American Free Trade Agreement in the U.S. Congress in April 2005, there is likely to be even more attention to the problem the maras present for people in the region in terms of homicides, robberies, harassment, and extortion. In view of the violence the maras promote, it is no wonder that sectors of the population look back with nostalgia to the military regimes when there was order and stability, albeit authoritarian order enforced by state directed violence, as “the good old days.” There is no doubt but that the maras are a pervasive criminal fact in Central America.[2] The question I will address in this paper is whether, in addition to their unquestioned and pervasive criminal behavior, they are also a threat to national security in the region and to the United States

### Maras

#### Background

The maras emerged out of the conflicts during the 1980s in Central America and are manifestations of our globalized world.[3] In the context of the wars and insurgencies in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua, thousands of people, including young men, fled North, a great many arriving as illegal aliens in Los Angeles, California. A certain percentage of these young men had been involved in the conflict, either on the side of the governments or the insurgents, and were familiar with guns and armed combat. In Los Angeles they encountered a difficult work and social situation, which was already structured in terms of gangs involving in particular African Americans in the Crips and Bloods, Mexican-Americans, and illegal Mexican immigrants in the EME or Mexican Mafia. A certain percentage of these young men, especially those from El Salvador where the insurgency was a civil war, joined the 18th Street Gang, M-18 from 18th. Street in LA, which has been begun by Mexicans expanded to Hispanics, African

Americans, and Asians. Salvadorans founded the Mara Salvatrucha, to compete with the former, considering the Salvadorans in M-18 traitors, and with other gangs in the barrios of Los Angeles. They gave themselves the number thirteen, in line with 13th. Street. As most of what the maras were and are involved in is criminal activity, they were arrested and put into prison. In prison they further defined and honed their gang identities and criminal skills.

With the peace processes ending the war in El Salvador in 1992, and spreading throughout the region by the mid-1990s, the U.S. Government deported the maras on release from prison back to their countries of origin. This was the same time as the eruption of the Los Angeles riots after the Rodney King trial decision on April 29, 1992, and the Latino gang members were considered a key element of the violence which was only put down with support from the National Guard and active duty military.<sup>[4]</sup> Once back in San Salvador, Guatemala City, San Pedro Sula, etc. the maras established themselves in these war-torn societies, and have been growing ever since.

Mara Salvatrucha, or MS-13, already fully formed in Los Angeles, was established in San Salvador in 1992 by the *clicas* (cliques, cells, or groups) deported from the United States and replacing earlier, less violent, and less sophisticated gangs. M-18 was established in El Salvador in 1996 with three clicas. Today both maras are spread across all departments. The terms *pandillas* and *clicas* are often used interchangeably. All maras are *pandillas* but not vice versa.

In El Salvador there are approximately 11,000 active members divided among MS-13 (7,000), M-18 (4,000), and others (200). According to the PNC, the membership numbers for all the countries in the region are as follows: Honduras (36,000 in 112 groups); Guatemala (14,000 in 434 groups); El Salvador (11,000 in 4); Nicaragua (4,500 in 268); Costa Rica (2,700 in 6); Panama (1,400 in 94); and Belize (100 in 2 groups), for a regional total of 69,145 in 920 groups.<sup>[5]</sup>

MS-13 and M-18 are found in all but Costa Rica and Panama. There are, in addition, others in the different countries: Costa Rica (Los Chapulines); Guatemala (Los Cholos, Los Nicas, and Los Batos Locos); El Salvador (La Mao Mao and La Maquina); Honduras (La Mao Mao, Los Batos locos, and Los Rockeros); Nicaragua (Gerber Boys and Los Charly).<sup>[6]</sup>

The maras are not only a Central America regional phenomenon; rather they are transnational. The MS-13, for example, reportedly has 20,000 members in the United States and 4,000 members in Canada, for a total of 96,000 in the hemisphere. It shouldn't be surprising that the numbers are variable. Mara membership is dynamic and census-taking is rudimentary.

### **Mara Criminal Activities**

From the available data, it appears that virtually everything the maras do is criminal activity.<sup>[7]</sup> This was the case even before El Salvador and Honduras passed laws over the past three years making membership in a mara against the law. Summaries from the PNC in El Salvador list the following activities as defining for the maras: Selling drugs; extortion; prostitution; homicide; and illegal movement of drugs, people, and arms across borders. The most recent PNC document, from February 2005, notes that the two major sources of income are the drug trade and extortions.

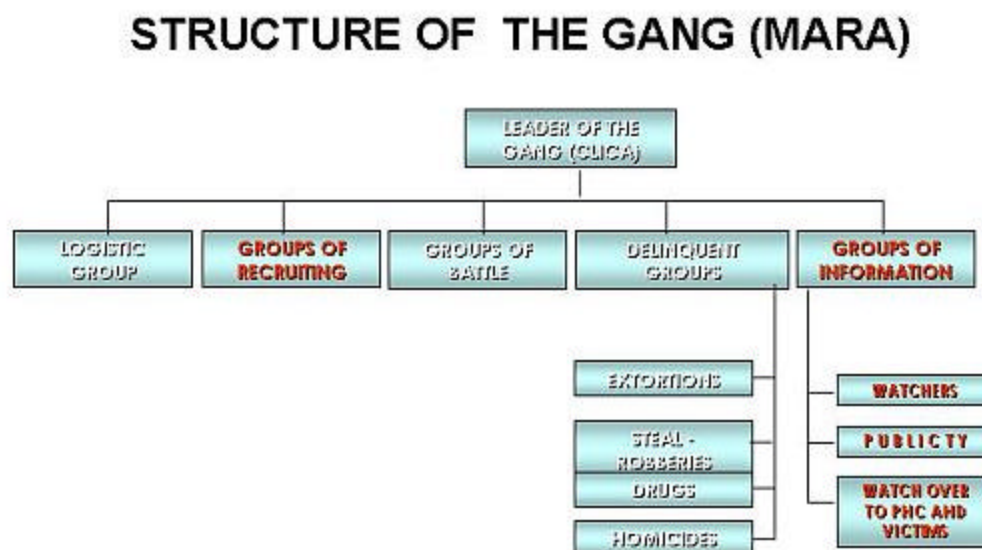
Their structures are elaborate, flexible, and redundant with a leadership cadre and another to back it up. They can function as networks, with extensive transnational linkages. Their internal functions include recruiting, logistics, attacks, intelligence (collecting and propaganda), and activities including murders, drugs, extortions, and others. <sup>[Figure 1]</sup>

They increasingly arm their members, including with heavier weapons including M-16s, AK-47s, and grenades. Their members are reported to be increasingly sophisticated in using these arms.

They use unique tattoos, have their own symbols and graffiti, and their own language both written and through hand signals. Each mara has its own internal rules which are very elaborate. Even in view of these unique, and at times bizarre or grotesque characteristics, probably the most defining characteristic of the maras, is the use of violence. Indeed, their unique vocabularies emphasize precisely the criminal activities and violence. From initiation, to ascension into leadership positions, to discipline, everything is based on violence.

To enter the MS-13, to be baptized into the mara, requires thirteen seconds of being beaten by four members of the mara, without putting up any resistance and only being allowed to cover the face and genitals. Later, as part of the ascension process, they have to kill a person for no other cause than to show they can, and this is called “Sangre Afuera, Sangre Adentro” (blood outside, and blood inside). For women, if strong, they undergo the same initiation rite. If not, they have to have sex with all the male members of the mara. The maras are continually fighting not only against the authorities, but also against each other for turf and markets, especially for drugs.

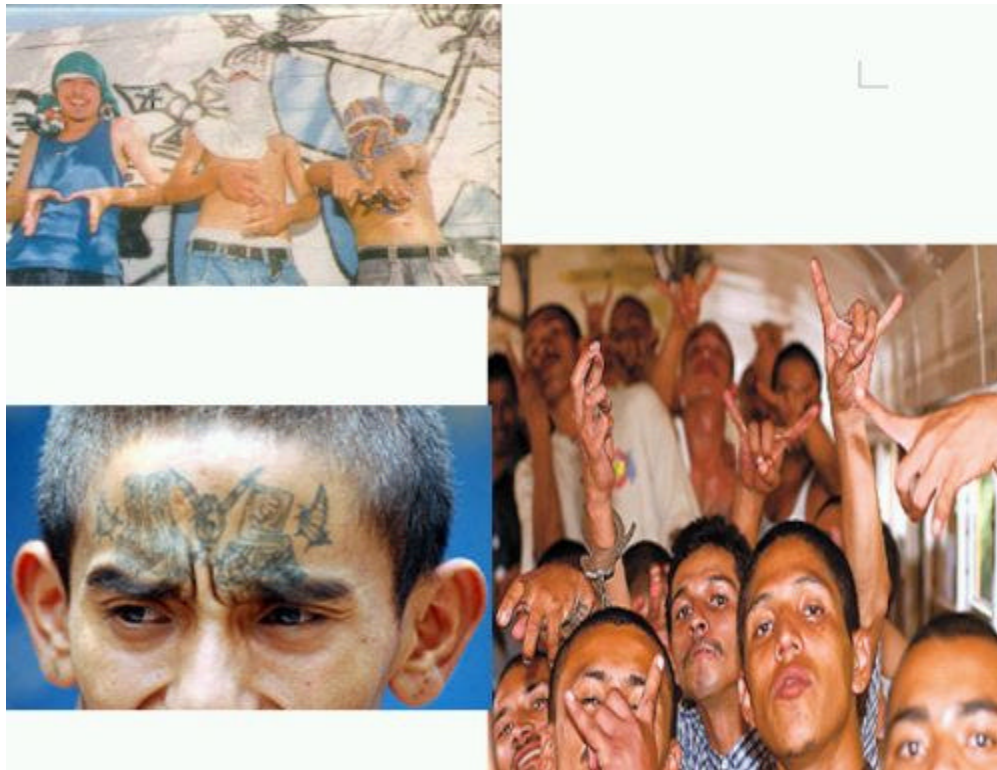
**Figure1:**



There is of course much that is scary about the maras as they define themselves in contrast to the rest of society and to other gangs. [\[Figure 2\]](#)

The PNC in El Salvador lists the various causes of homicides which include the following: rivalries among gangs, to extract revenge, dispute over territories, for opposition to payment of rent, for denying them a favor, or if anyone gets into a conflict with them for any reason. As part of their aggressiveness, at least MS-13 commit murders including mutilations and decapitations. According to Dom Romulo Emiliani, Auxiliary Bishop of San Pedro Sula, between eight and twelve percent of the maras are psychopaths, “...murderers, addicted to blood.”[\[8\]](#)

**Figure 2:**



### **Modern and Transnational Criminal Organizations**

While engaging in, and indeed defining themselves in terms of violence, the maras are both modern and transnational. They are modern in their use of technology for communications including cell phones, the internet, and have their own webpages; for example: [www.salvatrucha13.com](http://www.salvatrucha13.com) and [www.xv3gang.com](http://www.xv3gang.com). As they have their own language and symbols, it is a serious challenge for the police to keep up with them. They are transnational in that they move readily throughout the region, including into and out of the United States and Canada. Thus if they are pursued in one country, El Salvador for example, they move to neighboring Guatemala or Honduras to escape capture. The same applies to movement into and out of the United States. In interviews in El Salvador I was told of how the MS-13 planned and carried out a murder in one country, by coordinating with their members in two other countries. While the nation-state may still be the organization for laws, military, and the police, the maras are able to work on the seams and thus confound the authorities.

### **Maras in New and Poor Democracies**

#### **New and Fragile Democracies**

In the United States the maras are a serious criminal phenomenon that are combated by the local police and federal agencies including the Federal Bureau of Investigation. In Los Angeles, for example, there are an estimated 110,000 gang members in 700 different groups. They are clearly a very serious problem, as indicated by the meeting of seventy-two different police departments

in Los Angeles in January 2005. The situation, and the implications, in Central America are even more serious.

Until the 1990s, the most countries in the region (El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua) were dictatorships in which the military was used to exert control and repress dissent. In all but Honduras, this resulted in conflicts including a twelve year civil war in El Salvador, a thirty-six year insurgency in Guatemala, and a revolution, with dramatic aftermath for twelve years in Nicaragua. The loss of life was in the hundreds of thousands, societal and economic disruption disastrous, and the scars and tensions continue. In sum, the economic, political, and social background of the region is very problematic and fragile. In no country is there a solid basis for democracy in either institutions or culture. While El Salvador has been reasonably successful in consolidating its democracy, and Honduras a bit less so, the political dynamics in Guatemala and Nicaragua have resulted in still tentative and unconsolidated democracies. This is the political context within which the maras operate.

Economically and socially, all of the countries, with some variations, are very poor and characterized by severe class or ethnic (Guatemala) differences. In no country are there enough jobs for the population, the economies are extremely vulnerable to outside competition (as in coffee production and low level manufacturing), and education and social services are rudimentary. The challenges involved now with competition from China and the implications arising from Free Trade Treaties with the United States are daunting. These are poor countries with huge social problems.

There are equally serious problems in terms of the armed forces and the police. The background in all countries was that the military either dominated politics directly or were used by the elites to maintain themselves in power. As part of the transition towards democracy, including the peace processes with extensive outside involvement in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua, the military were removed from politics, generally excluded from domestic roles, diminished in size, and their budgets slashed. While civilian control is exercised effectively today without opposition in all countries but possibly Nicaragua, the overall relations and the roles and missions of the military forces are still in flux. In no country, for example, has the government developed a national security strategy defining the roles and missions of the forces. The militaries are, in short, between and betwixt the past and the future. As the militaries were diminished in size and their roles and missions restricted, new police forces were created. In all but El Salvador, where during the last few years the PNC has proven itself a capable and professional force, the police are too small, poorly funded, unprofessional, and simply unable to cope with general police requirements, let alone a challenge as dynamic and violent as the maras.<sup>[9]</sup>

In sum, the political institutions are new, democratic legitimacy is problematic, the countries are poor, social problems huge, the military are supposed to be out of domestic roles and missions, and the police are inadequate. And, the rule of law, with all of the bases in law, enforcement, and the judicial system, remains tentative. This is the context within which the maras, and their significance for national security, must be assessed.

## **Maras and their Implications for National Security in Central America**

According to Anne Aguilera, the head of the office for Central America at the International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL), U.S. Department of State, "We consider that the maras are the greatest problem for national security at this time in Central America and part of Mexico."<sup>[10]</sup> The maras can operate as networks, are very flexible, and largely successful in their dealings with the hierarchically structured nation-states in the region, including the United States. They challenge the national security of the countries in the region in a number of different and very serious ways. Initially, it must be emphasized that they challenge the personal security of



millions of inhabitants in the region, mainly but not only the lower classes, including those seeking to migrate North.<sup>[11]</sup> In terms of national security, there are at least five threats or challenges.

First, and structurally, they overwhelm the governments, including the police and the legal systems, by their sheer audacity, violence, and numbers. One telling statistic is that of the 138 murders committed in El Salvador in January 2005, 79 or 48.9 percent were committed by the maras. Or, another PNC source reports that in 2003, 60 percent of the criminal activities in El Salvador were due to the maras. While El Salvador and Honduras have policies in place to attempt to deal with the maras, both Guatemala and Nicaragua are so far unable to develop and implement policies. These facts, the level of violence and the difficulty of the government in dealing with it, raise very serious questions about the governability of these countries. In the context of these new democracies any challenge as strong as the maras aggravate the already existent concern regarding the desirability of democracy as a system of government that “can do the job.”

Second, democracy is not only about structures, or institutions, but also about culture. These new democracies have not had time to establish a culture of democracy in which this form of government is “the only game in town”. Notably in Guatemala and Nicaragua, some of the political elites, right up to the level of president, have been proven to be corrupt, and the political systems function poorly. The new democracies are, then, already challenged by historical and current problems, and adding the maras, which make a travesty of the state's supposed control and public service, can only further deteriorate the already low level of legitimacy.

Third, the maras are already acting as surrogate or alternate governments in some areas, including in El Salvador and Guatemala. The governments have all but given up in some areas of the capitals, and the maras extract taxes on individuals and businesses. If people don't pay up, they are killed, as the bus driver and his assistant referred to in note two above. The governments are unable to do anything about it due to a lack of police personnel and resources.

Fourth, the maras in at least El Salvador, where the PNC intelligence is good, have gone into small businesses, but of course compete unfairly in that they are all too ready to use violence against competitors. They have also rented themselves out to other businesses, such as bus companies, to intimidate their competition. Their economic behavior of course downgrades other economic activity in that it perpetuates itself and can result in a spiral of violence directed against other businesses. Some officials who have responsibility to monitor the maras have raised the question as to what they do with the considerable sums of money they make from crime. They don't pay taxes and their facilities and equipment are not expensive. There is concern that they are buying up legitimate businesses and paying off government officials, including the police.

Finally, the PNC in El Salvador have identified new trends as the maras seek to penetrate the police and non-governmental organizations, and could theoretically be used by political groups. If accurate they demonstrate a political sense, an ability to think and act strategically. The concern is that they may make themselves available for hire to radical groups which have not been successful in the new democracies through the use of elections and interest groups, thereby further jeopardizing democracy.

In sum, the maras pose, in the context of these new and poor democracies, several serious challenges, including to national security. It cannot be emphasized enough how tentative and fragile these political and economic systems are in the region. It wouldn't take much to destabilize them, and indeed Guatemala and Nicaragua have been unstable in the recent past, with the transition from President Portillo (still hiding out on Mexico) to President Berger in Guatemala with mob rampages and threats from Rios Montt, or with the ongoing impasse between the center and right and the FSLN in Nicaragua. In this context the maras, with their violence, networks, and emerging strategies, can pose even more serious challenges in the future if they build on their current ability to punish and intimidate in support of a political party or radical group. There are

signs of this happening now, and if it works, given their great ability to communicate and to learn, more of this can be expected. The fear is that Central America will go the way of Colombia, where long-term government inaction resulted in the loss of state control over at least forty percent of the country, the expansion of organized crime based largely on narcotics, and terrorism. In Central America, the maras are already linked to organized crime, but unlike Colombia, the threat is located in the urban areas, and is not due so much to neglect as to a lack of resources. The motivation now appears to be present to do something.

## Responses to the Maras

### National Responses

Beginning with the election of Ricardo Maduro in Honduras in 2001, the countries in the region began to crack down on the maras using “mano dura” or hard or heavy hand, methods. (Maduro’s only son had been killed in an kidnapping attempt). He was able to have the penal code revised in August 2003 so that mere membership in a gang is illegal and punishable with between six and twelve years in prison. He also put the army on the street to back up the 8,000 police (against 36,000 maras).<sup>[12]</sup> In the presidential elections in 2003 in Guatemala and 2004 in El Salvador, Oscar Berger and Elias Antonio “Tony” Saca, respectively, campaigned on cracking down on crime.

In El Salvador the government passed into law and implemented draconian measures to seek to discourage membership in the maras and their activities. Already, in El Salvador on July 23, 2003 the Government of President Flores implemented the Plan Mano Dura. Based on their positive assessment of the results of this Plan, arresting 18,000 maras, the Government of Tony Saca implemented the Plan Mano Super Dura, or Super Hard Hand Plan, of August 30, 2004 which added to the former plan. According to their own assessments, these plans are successful. At least El Salvador, the plans include elements of prevention, reinsertion, and rehabilitation as well as correction (or imprisonment).<sup>[13]</sup>

Domestic critics, such as Dr. Oscar Bonilla, President of the National Council on Public Security in El Salvador, wonder how effective these penal measures can be in view of the weakness of rehabilitation capabilities in the prison system and the flexibility of the maras in asserting new, and possibly even more violent leaders once the current leaders are imprisoned. For example, data from the PNC of February 2005 document that 3,000 maras have been recruited in prisons. Of these 1,630 are MS-13 and 1,000 M-18. When we look at the earlier numbers of approximately 11,000 maras in El Salvador, these figures of 3,000 are telling. Further, it is documented that the imprisoned mara leaders continue to direct the organizations outside. Bonilla, and the Council, promote a strategy of prevention and reintegration into society in what is termed a strategy of Mano Amigo.<sup>[14]</sup>

### Regional Responses

There is much going on in the region at different levels of government and in cooperation with the United States. What follows are just some of the more significant events.

The presidents of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua met on January 14, 2004 in Guatemala City on the MS-13 and M-18, and declared that these two maras in particular are a regional problem, are a problem for citizen security, that policy must be strengthened, that the social costs are high, and the maras are linked to organized crime. There had already been a meeting of a Technical Group to Study and Evaluate the Criminal Activity of the Gangs and Maras, November 9, 2003 in Belmopan, Belize and then in Panama on December 4th.

President Saca proposed to the SICA (Sistema de Integración Centroamericana) a "Plan Centroamérica Segura" in June 2004 at the Summit of CA Presidents in Guatemala.

The First Foro Regional on The Social Prevention of Violence, Rehabilitation, and Reinsertion of Youth at Risk and in Conflict with the Law was held in the form of an Extraordinary Reunion of the Ministers of Defense, Security, and/or Interior in Tegucigalpa, Honduras on March 3, 2005.

There is also much going on with a U.S. role of police and FBI cooperation in terms of information, models, police training, and the like. The U.S. organizations involved include the U.S. embassies in the region, municipal and country police in US, DHS, FBI, INS, DEA, etc.

There is, in short, now a great deal of government attention to regional coordination as well as involvement by a large variety of U.S. departments and agencies. Even so, implementation must be at a national, or better, local level, and here the problems include the lack of personnel, vague police powers, questionable legality/constitutionality, unwillingness of judges to enforce the laws, vulnerability of the legal systems to intimidation and corruption, and criticism by the UN and NGOs.<sup>[15]</sup>

## Implications for U.S. National Security

Nobody should forget that until approximately fifteen years ago the United States was committed to "stopping the spread of Communism in Central America." All one needs to do is visit the gigantic U.S. embassy in tiny El Salvador to remember the extent of the U. S. Government's commitment of hundreds of millions of dollars, military advisors, and willingness to face domestic and international criticisms in first halting the Leftist insurgencies and then promoting peace processes and assisting the transition to democracies. Today, with the arrival of peace and democracy, the United States wants stability. Specifically, U.S. security goals in the region include "...to promote commitment to democratic values, respect for human rights, territorial security and sovereignty, and collective regional security."<sup>[16]</sup> Insofar as the maras threaten democratic values, respect for human rights, and territorial security and sovereignty, they are a threat to U.S. national security.

One of the main ingredients of democracy in the region is the removal of the military from internal roles, but for humanitarian assistance in natural disasters. Since the police everywhere are overwhelmed by the maras, governments have no option but to put the troops back into the streets. In El Salvador they serve in strictly support roles to the PNC, but in Guatemala and Honduras they are there on their own. The concern is, that once the troops are back on the streets, and their presence is enthusiastically welcomed by the population, they may never leave again. In addition, but for El Salvador, and possibly Honduras, the intelligence organizations have not been reformed and professionalized. The concern here is that these organizations, with the emphasis on collecting information on the maras, will emerge stronger and not under democratic civilian control. Insofar as the United States supports democratic consolidation and civilian control of the armed forces, the return of the forces to the streets and the intelligence agencies to domestic issues is a negative trend.

From all the data I have seen, there is no hard evidence linking the maras to terrorism. Of course, all are aware of the precedent of Colombia where terrorism, in the form of the FARC, ELN, and AUC are linked to organized crime in the form of the narcotics trade. They are also aware of the training the FARC have received from the IRA in urban terrorist techniques.

Experts are also concerned that the skills and connections of the maras in moving people, arms, and drugs across borders, including into the United States, could be used as well to move terrorists. For example, it is estimated that sixty-five percent of the maras deported from the United States return illegally.<sup>[17]</sup> Since there is ample evidence that the maras are



entrepreneurial, opportunistic, and unscrupulous, some officials are concerned that they will move terrorists or even weapons of mass destruction through the region and into the United States

To date the only “hard evidence” I have seen is an article in Prensa Grafica de Honduras on September 30, 2004, which was picked up and disseminated widely in the United States, and turned out to be false.<sup>[18]</sup> Since that article, six months ago, there is no new evidence that I am aware of linking the maras to international terrorism.

From my perspective, having attempted to begin to understand the maras, there is nothing definitive from a cultural perspective on their side to prevent their taking money from Islamic Jihadists to smuggle terrorists or WMD into the United States. Some might say that these are Hispanics and thus Christian, and wouldn't cooperate with Muslims in terrorism. Christians are not supposed to rob and murder, and the maras do so routinely. Despite tattoos and names to the contrary, they don't seem to care about religion. In light of the barbaric acts they regularly engage in, it seems likely that many of them are totally pathological, with absolutely no values or notion of right and wrong. Indeed, there are reports that they join Christian Evangelical churches to provide cover as they move from area to area, and country to country, to engage in crime.

In sum, I don't see anything in their culture or values (or absence of same) to prevent them from working with international terrorists. Whether Islamic Jihadists would work with them is another matter entirely.

However, since they are opportunistic, not ideological, and are able to calculate the costs and benefits of their actions, they are unlikely to risk the wrath that would surely follow if they were associated with anything as serious as transnational terrorism. They murdered almost thirty people on a bus in San Pedro Sula in December 2004 as a political challenge to the Government of President Maduro. Reportedly, all of the murderers have been captured, including in Houston, which show that the police can work regionally and effectively if need be. This cannot be lost on the maras. Further, on March 14, 2005 more than one hundred MS-13 members were captured in cities across the United States, again demonstrating that when motivated, police in the United States can respond.<sup>[19]</sup> While the maras may be suicidal in terms of bringing on their own deaths, they are not suicidal in an Islamic Fundamentalist manner. Further, they are very familiar with the United States, and unlike Al Qaeda, cannot believe that we will collapse as a nation through terrorist attacks. In short, if the maras go beyond what they are now engaged in, and become in any way associated with terrorism, they can count on being hit, and hit hard. It would of course be foolhardy to predict a future absence of links between the maras and international terrorists based upon the past. But, from what I have been able to understand about the maras, while they engage in horrible criminal activities and are a threat to national security in the region, they are not now a threat to U.S. national security beyond our laudable support for democracy and stability.

## Possible Future Trends

The maras as a transnational phenomenon continue to expand, to diversify, and are increasingly violent with more powerful weapons. In a recent article John P. Sullivan and Robert J. Bunker analyze “third generation” gangs as influenced by politicization, internationalization, and sophistication.<sup>[20]</sup> Utilizing these criteria, the maras, including MS-13, have already reached the third generation. Sullivan and Bunker state: “All share networked organizational features and are difficult to counter. These groups have the potential to refine network designs and new technological tools to challenge the dominance of nation-states and carve out new realms of activity for the non-state soldier.”<sup>[21]</sup>

Some of the maras are already there. The question then remains, what is the next phase for the maras? Even though some countries, such as El Salvador and Honduras, may be successful in holding the line, other countries such as Guatemala and Nicaragua may not be. And, there are

tens of thousands of maras, and they continue to recruit, with the result that it will not be anytime soon that we see their numbers diminishing. Until then, and maybe even then, they are available for these “new realms of activity for the non-state soldiers.”

We, and obviously the countries most involved, need to cooperate even more and must be attentive, must develop new and better means of collecting intelligence, including by penetrating the maras, to ensure that these “soldiers” do not seek to overthrow our states and societies. Intelligence, both human and technical, must be utilized to keep track of these “non-state soldiers.” Hopefully this intelligence, under democratic civilian control, is already being utilized. They are a criminal problem, but an extremely serious one, that must be fought first of all by the police, but supported by all other assets of the region’s national security systems.

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## References

1. See, for example, ["Tattooed Warriors: The Next Generation: Shuttling Between Nations, Latino Gangs Confound The Law,"](#) the front page article, that continues on for two pages, by Ginger Thompson in the *New York Times* on September 26, 2004. Two recent articles include Max Manwaring, “Street Gangs: The New Urban Insurgency,” *Strategic Studies Institute Monograph* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2005, forthcoming), and Ana Arana, [“How the Street Gangs Took Central America,”](#) *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2005.
2. Unfortunately typical is what happened in Guatemala City my last weekend in the country. Maras killed a bus driver and his assistant in the morning in a poor section of town, and out of fear all other bus drivers stopped driving for the day until the National Civilian Police (PNC) promised they would provide more security. During the day, tens of thousands of people had no public transportation. Maras killed another driver in the afternoon. See [Prensa Libre](#), Guatemala April 16, 2005.
3. The most important mara in El Salvador is the Mara Salvatrucha, or MS-13. There are different meanings given to the name of the group. The most common is as follows: Maras mean people rioting or out of control. Salva refers to those coming from El Salvador. And Trucha means savvy or street smart. While this paper refers to the region in general, the best data is available in El Salvador from the National Civilian Police (PNC) Intelligence Center. I rely heavily on these data while supplementing it with data from other countries, including the United States. MS-13 is considered the most serious and violent of the maras. See on this point *Tiempos del Mundo*, “Centroamerica y El Caribe,” April 7, 2005, 2-3.
4. On attributing responsibility for the riots to gang members see Luis J. Rodriguez, [“A Gang of Our Own Making,”](#) *The New York Times*, March 28, 2005.
5. These data are from the PNC in El Salvador. They are more conservative than other data I have seen.
6. On Nicaragua, see Dr. Dennis Rodgers, [“‘We Live in a State of Siege’: Violence, Crime, and Gangs in Post-Conflict Urban Nicaragua,”](#) Development Studies Institute, London School of Economics, September 2002.

7. These data include PNC studies, my interviews in El Salvador and Guatemala the first two weeks of April 2005, and newspaper accounts in the United States and Central America.
8. *Tiempos Del Mundo Centroamerica y Caribe*, April 7, 2005, 3. Obviously I am taking a criminal and national security view of the maras. One could also look into the economic, psychological, and social causes of this phenomenon. See for example, the thorough and balanced study by Ana Margarita Chavez Escobar, Executive Director of the Salvadoran Antidrug Commission (COSA), "Drogas y Delitos Conexos: Maras y Iniciativas Locales de Prevencion" (San Salvador: COSA, March 2004).
9. In an interview with [Prensa Libre](#), Guatemala, on April 17, 2005, the Chief of the PNC in Guatemala stated the following: "Really, the Police are in a chaotic situation. ...I can assure you that the Police are in their worst situation in their history."
10. [La Prensa Grafica](#), El Salvador, April 8, 2005.
11. Indicative, and disturbing, are the data for Guatemala and Honduras (the only Central American countries included) in the [Pew Global Attitudes Project for 2002](#). In response to a question on whether crime is a very big problem in your country, 93 percent in both Guatemala and in Honduras said yes. These were the highest percentages, but for two other counties (Bangladesh and South Africa) of the 44 countries surveyed. In the United States, it was 48 percent and in Brazil 82 percent and Mexico 81 percent. For the unsurprising fact that it is the lower strata that suffer most not only in Central America but also the Southern Cone, see for example, Catalina Smulovitz, "Citizen Insecurity and Fear: Public and Private Responses in Argentina," in Hugo Fruhling, ed., *Crime and Violence in Latin America: Citizen Security, Democracy and the State* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), especially 133, Table 6.3.
12. Numbers from September 26, 2004 edition of [The New York Times](#).
13. The laws are basically "Zero Tolerance" and the details, and data on results, are beyond the scope of this short paper. It should be noted, however, that in terms of citizen's perception of success in the fight against crime, they are successful. For data see *Latinobarometro*, 2004, 49-50.
14. Interview by author with Dr. Oscar Bonilla on April 8, 2005 in San Salvador. For more social and psychological approaches to the problem of the maras see Ana Margarita Chavez Escobar, *Op. Cit.* (in note 8 above). Tom Hayden's, *Street Wars: Gangs and the Future of Violence* (New York: The New Press, 2004) provides a social, psychological, and sympathetic approach to the topic.
15. Criticism and opposition, especially of the zero tolerance policies, come from the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Children, El Salvador's Human Rights Office, various NGOs, including Homies Unidos, a Los Angeles-based group of former gang members that works to rehabilitate those still in them.
16. [Posture Statement](#) of General Bantz J. Craddock, USA, Commander, United States Southern Command, Before the 109th Congress, Senate Armed Services Committee, March 15, 2005, 2-3.
17. Aguilera Interview, *Op. Cit.*, as in note viii above.
18. See [The Daily Texan](#), October 22, 2004.

19. However, they were deported to their countries of origin, which just continues the vicious circle of sending them back where they continue to develop their clicas.

20. See John P. Sullivan and Robert J. Bunker, "Drug Cartels, Street Gangs, and Warlords," *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Special Issue edited by Robert J. Bunker "Non-State Threats and Future Wars," 13, no. 2 (Summer 2002), 40-53.

21. *Ibid.*, 52.